



Charlotte Mason's House of Education,  
Scale How, Ambleside, UK, 2009

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## ON THE TEACHING OF HOLY SCRIPTURE.\*

BY REV. J. G. SIMPSON.

MY subject is the importance of the text of Scripture, the words of the Bible, as the basis of all religious instruction. You understand what I mean by this. Make the child familiar from his earliest days with what the Bible actually says: let the language of evangelist, prophet, apostle sink deep into his mind, so that they, rather than the phrases of any explanation, or formula of instruction, become associated with his religious and spiritual thoughts. Do not be content with believing that, when he is old enough to understand and to discriminate, he will read the Bible, as he will read other books, and that then he will be able to see for himself that the teaching which you have given in your own words, or in those of some authorized catechism, corresponds with what Christ actually said, with what His apostles actually wrote. Let him rather feel that the Holy Book was his own possession from the very first, and that the instruction of his parents, of his spiritual pastors and masters, is only the methodising of the knowledge he has already gained from the fountain and spring of it all.

We hear so much about definite religious education and the necessity of teaching specific doctrine, that we are apt, I fancy, to under-estimate the primary importance of a thorough and intimate knowledge of the Bible. I should indeed be sorry to be misunderstood, or to leave the impression that I imagine for one moment that it is possible to impart religious and spiritual truth without doctrine.

Spiritual training is education in the knowledge of God, and this must of necessity involve some definite proposition, if it be only the simple statement that *God is*. But that is dogma. Dogma is nothing else but truth put in such a form that it can be conveyed from one mind to another. By our

\* An Address delivered before the Leeds Branch of the Union.

ON THE TEACHING

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membership in a Christian society we imply that we hold for true the faith of the body to which we belong. Nothing can, I venture to believe, be more disastrous than that we should not seek to make our sons and daughters good members of that communion to which we ourselves adhere. No good comes of unattached Christians; indeed the phrase, if properly understood, is quite unmeaning. You will not therefore accuse me of failure to appreciate the importance of dogmatic teaching. But just because such teaching must ultimately stand or fall with the Bible; just because, as we all believe, the system of our own particular creed must ultimately be justified or corrected by an appeal to Holy Scripture, I am convinced that our first duty is to see that the feet of the little ones are firmly planted upon this impregnable rock.

In the course of my experience in connexion with divinity students there is one fact which has impressed itself upon me with no little uneasiness, and that is the evident want of familiarity with the text of Holy Scripture among young men approaching the Christian ministry. We expect, and we are surely entitled to expect, that they will be able to find their way about the Bible with the readiness with which a Leeds man, born and bred, moves up and down the streets and lanes of this city. You expect, for instance, that if you ask such an one what our Lord says about the Holy Spirit, the great words of the last discourses recorded in the Gospel of St. John will immediately rise to his lips. Yet I have myself known a university graduate, who hoped in a few weeks to undertake the responsibilities of a teacher in the Church of God, silent when this question was put to him. Nor is this a solitary instance. I have found men fail again and again in giving the context of passages of Scripture which to me had always seemed trite and commonplace. Nor do I think that my experience is at all unique. I have frequently noticed how unscriptural the younger clergy often are; how far from their fingers' ends the Bible seems to be; how little there is often of Scriptural illustration, of comparison of text with text, in the sermons to which I have had to listen. To my mind this is in large measure accountable for the lack of interest which not seldom attends the modern discourse. You do not feel as though the preacher were drawing water out of the inexhaustible wells of God's Holy



Word. There is an eloquence and a power in the words of that Divine Book which rivet the attention and reach the heart, however faltering the lips, however imperfect the utterance.

You will say to me, perhaps, that this complaint would be more suitably made to an audience of theological tutors. If this be true, there is, admittedly, a very serious defect, but the remedy is to be sought in an improved system of preparation for ordination candidates. And I dare say you are inclined to add some not too complimentary phrases about "fouling my own nest" and "washing my dirty linen in public." But, if you will listen to me a little longer, I think you will recognise that there is more method in my madness than at once appears, and that a greater responsibility rests with you than is apparent on the surface. On one occasion I wrote to the head of one of our theological colleges, who rather resented my view of the inadequacy of fundamental Biblical knowledge possessed by students passing out of these institutions. He thought—so far as I recall the gist of his letter—that my strictures, if delivered publicly, would tend to throw suspicion upon colleges whose aim was to supply the deficiency which I had pointed out. "We are doing our very best," he said, "to impart to the men committed to our care a genuine knowledge of the Old and New Testaments." "But what can we do," he went on, "in the short space of one year, or two years at the outside, during which the men are with us?" The fault lies further back, not in the training of candidates for holy orders when they have reached the stage of the theological college, the last step towards the ministry, but in the whole previous preparation of their lives. They have been at the university, at public schools, at preparatory schools. Before that, again, there has been the early training of the home. And from all this young men emerge with an acquaintance so rudimentary, so crude, so vague, that the boys and girls of the sixth standard in a well-taught national school would often put them to shame. One might as well expect the Universities of Oxford and Cambridge to teach the undergraduates the laws of English grammar, as ask the College of Divinity to occupy its students with the elementary instruction of the home Bible lesson. The conclusion to which we are driven

is, I fear, just this—that in England, and especially of those not familiar with the country, are moulded the very language. For, let us remember, the candidates for the office of the most religiously minded, though that I suppose is those to whom the study is the greatest attraction. Now the satisfactory knowledge of the multitude who pass through the hands of the clergyman who found a religion, busily searching the minor Epistles, had not, I fear, the stories which pass of ignorance of Oxford under the examinations in divinity, ordinary course for the grossly exaggerated, and, very sad comment upon the classes of English society. sympathy between the pulpit and the language of the clergy, the sphere in which they are alien and unintelligible. The life of to-day and its many acknowledged a part of the must bear. But, on the other hand, the remoteness of the people to the fact that he is bound to the knowledge of the Bible, which he simply does not possess, seems how much of the indifference, the actual unbelief of the people, to a closed Bible. Children have been taught and heard what the Bible says of God. But the Book has not been of all that is Christian has been from their earliest days; the



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is, I fear, just this—that the young men and women of England, and especially of the leisured classes amongst us, are not familiar with the contents of that Book, whose words have moulded the very language that we speak.

For, let us remember, those who present themselves as candidates for the office of Christian ministers are, I will not say the most religiously minded among their contemporaries, though that I suppose is very often the case, but at least those to whom the study of religious subjects offers the greatest attraction. Now if even they exhibit a far from satisfactory knowledge of the Bible, what must be the case with the multitude who pass into other walks of life? The clergyman who found a member of his confirmation class busily searching the minor prophets for the Epistle to the Ephesians, had not, I fear, a very exceptional experience. The stories which pass current concerning the ridiculous ignorance of Oxford undergraduates, presenting themselves at the examinations in divinity, which form a part of the ordinary course for the B.A. degree, are by no means grossly exaggerated, and, when looked at seriously, afford a very sad comment upon the homes of the upper and middle classes of English society. We hear sometimes of a want of sympathy between the pulpit and the pew. We are told that the language of the clergyman, the atmosphere in which he lives, the sphere in which he thinks, the circle of his interests, are alien and unintelligible to the layman, busy with the life of to-day and its manifold concerns. I have already acknowledged a part of the responsibility which we clergy must bear. But, on the other hand, I am perfectly certain that the remoteness of the preacher is due in no small degree to the fact that he is bound to take for granted a rudimentary knowledge of the Bible, which many of those who listen to him simply do not possess. And I want you to ask yourselves how much of the indifference to religion, how much of the actual unbelief of the present day, is due to nothing else than a closed Bible. Children have been taken, it may be, to church and heard what the parson has to say. They have been taught to accept the Scriptures *en bloc* as the truth of God. But the Book has not been open; this great fountain of all that is Christian has not been flowing by their side from their earliest days; they have never had the full oppor-



tunity of knowing what the truth of God is. Into the truths of this world of sense they have been gradually growing as their intelligence has expanded. From the first there has been that communion of the mind with nature, of which Bacon speaks, and so experience has been a continual entrance into the secrets of nature revealed in that open book. But that other Book, which is spirit and which is life, they have been taught to accept without being encouraged to open it. They have never grown year by year into the fulness of its meaning; they have never felt its living power; so that when the critic comes, with objections which, as often as not, have no appeal for the man who has made the words of Scripture a part of his life, the whole system, of which they are the record and the witness, falls away as an antiquated superstition into which it is scarcely worth while to inquire. As a fetich the Bible has been accepted; as a fetich, with the expanding intellect, it departs.

You will pardon me if I become autobiographical, because my experience of child-life is drawn almost entirely from my own. Though still a young man, I am old enough now to look backward over the influences that have moulded my life, and see them to some extent in their relation to one another. Looking backward almost to the dawn of conscious existence, there is one fact that seems to stand out conspicuously as a dominant influence, and it is this: I cannot remember the time when I did not know the Bible. Brought up in an evangelical home, where the fundamental doctrines of historical Christianity were assumed rather than explicitly stated, I was saturated with the language of Scripture before I went to school. I simply cannot tell you the time when I did not know the following texts: "Behold what manner of love the Father hath bestowed upon us that we should be called the sons of God"; "Behold, he cometh with clouds; and every eye shall see him"; "God so loved the world, that he gave his only begotten Son, that whosoever believeth in him should not perish, but have everlasting life"; "He was wounded for our transgressions, he was bruised for our iniquities"; "Whosoever will, let him take the water of life freely."

Right back in those early years I seem to have known the Bible. I recall the various devices by which an acquaintance

with its contents was secured. A portion for every day; the turning up and down the several number of words to the system of underlining words on the pages of an epistle; such as, "Who went down every day?" I cannot tell of the text of Scripture has prevented Christian me in what I humbly hope from seeming like question corresponding value in act science always presuppose which it reduces to order appeared to me, there must experience of Holy Scripture spiritual territory, of which napping out. One should order of things, among which theology, is an actual and which is like doubting the this way new interpretation the Bible records, new views only serve to intensify the contains. For those who know and whose conception of it is the assaults of scepticism can never exercise over the mind growing up into Scripture. the young the doctrines of contained in the Catechism as they are set forth in the minds of men and women in testimony of any authority, progressive, they must at length the language of the Samaritan not because of thy saying, for and know that this is indeed world."



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with its contents was secured—the Bible reading union with a portion for every day; the Bible clock, which sent you hunting up and down the several books for texts corresponding in number of words to the several hours of the day; the system of underlining words or thoughts as they recurred in the pages of an epistle; curious questions to be answered, such as, "Who went down into a pit and slew a lion on a snowy day?" I cannot tell you how much this knowledge of the text of Scripture has served me all through my life. It has prevented Christian doctrine, as it has been presented to me in what I humbly hope is its ever-increasing fulness, from seeming like questions of words and names with no corresponding value in actual experience. Just as natural science always presupposes an experience of phenomena, which it reduces to order and system; so, as it has always appeared to me, there must ever be the knowledge, the experience of Holy Scripture, as, so to speak, a very real spiritual territory, of which doctrine is the surveying and mapping out. One should always be able to feel that the order of things, among which we move in the sphere of theology, is an actual and living world, to deny the truth of which is like doubting the reality of the natural world. In this way new interpretations, new methods of dealing with the Bible records, new views of inspiration, new criticism only serve to intensify the reality of all that the Bible contains. For those who know the Bible only from without, and whose conception of it is therefore crude and uncertain, the assaults of scepticism come with a force that they can never exercise over the mind which from the first has been growing up into Scripture. It will never do merely to teach to the young the doctrines of the Church of England as they are contained in the Catechism, or of any other religious body as they are set forth in its recognised standards. The minds of men and women must ultimately get behind the testimony of any authority, whether of parent or pastor or communion. If their faith is to be real, permanent, and progressive, they must at length be able to make their own the language of the Samaritan villagers: "Now we believe, not because of thy saying, for we have heard him ourselves and know that this is indeed the Christ, the Saviour of the world."



This is why I plead that, above all things, Christian parents—those who themselves hold our Lord to be the Way, the Truth, and the Life—should make it their first business to create an atmosphere of Holy Scripture in which the spiritual life and the dogmatic learning of their children may be nourished and developed. Nothing, I think, is more certain than the darkness of average English society concerning the contents of the English Bible. Speaking generally, it is, I believe, perfectly true to say that young people do not know their Bibles. The scraps of the public Sunday lessons are totally inadequate. The Bible should be used in the household. Passages from psalmist, prophet, and evangelist should be learned by heart. You are shutting up and sealing the open Bible, if you do not send the children to its pages before there are mountains of prejudice to level and rivers of misunderstanding to cross.

## A TRIO OF REMBRANDT

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